

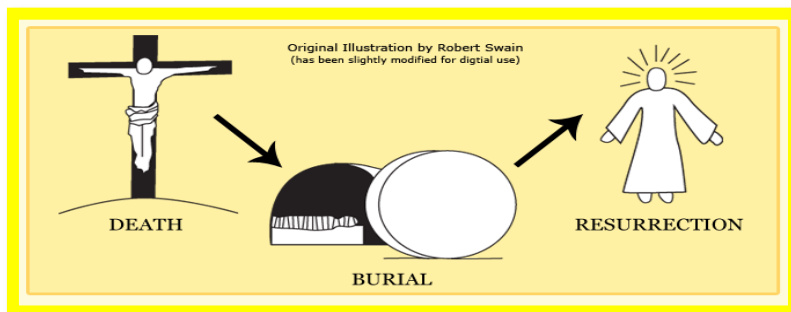
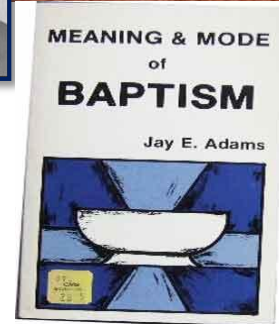
BAPTISM—Are Presbyterians Confused?

Paul G. Humber (revised, 2017)

Please do not get me wrong. Though I am a Baptist, I have had affection for many Presbyterian brothers, one of them being Dr. John H. Skilton. He was one of my professors at Westminster Seminary, and I served as President of his Skilton House Ministries for about the first six years of its existence. Here is a picture of him with my twins in Ocean City (1977). He wrote the Foreword to my first book, *Jehovah Jesus*, and our whole family has great love for this brother in the Lord.

Another of my Westminster professors was Dr. Jay E. Adams, and I have great admiration for him, too. He wrote *Competent to Counsel*, which really is a gift to the Church at large. Christian pastors should not bow to Freud or Rogers. Instead, they should be instructed by the Wonderful Counselor (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit (Author of Scripture).

In his little book entitled *Meaning and Mode of Baptism*, however, Dr. Adams reveals confusion. He believes the language of Scripture refers exclusively to sprinkling or pouring but never to immersion. Whereas the mode is secondary to the issue of who should be the subjects of baptism; nevertheless Dr. Adams spends significant time in his book about the mode. It is my purpose here to show that the Scriptures do not support his view that baptism means sprinkling/pouring—not immersion. More specifically, he believes the symbol of baptism depicts the descent of the Holy Spirit on the believer (i.e. sprinkling and/or pouring) rather than being buried with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection



(immersion into and out of water). Let us examine some of Dr. Adams' arguments in the light of Scripture with a view toward increasing understanding among all believers in this important area.

Old Testament:

Dr. Adams faults those who would start with the New Testament in their biblical study of baptism. He believes "baptism is as old as the law" (p. 9). The Jewish leaders of John's day, for example, reveal an expectation for baptismal activity in the Messianic age. They ask John, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet" (John 1:25 - NIV). Isaiah 52:15 and Ezekiel 36:25 might provide some background for this expectation, but Moses' example would even more so. The "Prophet" was to be "like" Moses (Deut.18:15-18), and Moses, according to Dr. Adams, was a sprinkler.



To establish this last point, Dr. Adams cites Hebrews 9:10 where the author refers to Old Testament "ceremonial washings." The word for washings in the original is "baptismois"; consequently, a legitimate translation of the phrase in question might be "ceremonial baptisms." Now what were these "ceremonial baptisms" according to the author of Hebrews? Dr. Adams believes they are "fully described in Hebrews 9:13 (cf. Numbers 19:17-18), 19 (cf. Ex. 24:6, 8), and 21 (cf. Lv. 8:19; 16:14). In every case, he maintains, they were sprinklings - sprinklings prescribed by Moses. Moses, therefore, was a sprinkler. The Jews of John's day would not have tolerated any innovations on John's part. John, therefore, could not have immersed his disciples; he must have sprinkled water upon them.

Dr. Adams is emphatic on this point. He says that "the law never required immersions, but frequently required 'sprinklings'" (p.10). A bit further down the page he says, "This argument is impossible to refute." Again, on the same page, he says, "This argument is impossible to refute." Again, on the same page, he says, "...it is impossible to find the requirement for even one kind of immersion in the Old Testament law...." On the next page he says, "There is no Old Testament requirement for immersion."

"Impossible to Refute"?

Elisha was a prophet not unlike John in that both followed in the footsteps of Elijah. Elisha commanded Naaman to wash in the Jordan (the very river used by John) for restoration and cleansing. We read:

So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy. (2 Kings 5:14)

This is a very important verse representing one of only two¹ places in the entire Old Testament where the Septuagint used the Greek word, baptizo (to baptize). Not even Dr.



Adams views Naaman's activity here as one of sprinkling.² Naaman immersed himself in water presenting at least one clear example of an Old Testament immersion, an immersion, moreover, required by a prophet of God. Dr. Adams' insistence on "no Old Testament requirement for immersion" should be challenged, therefore, and there is much more to be said on this point.

Consider, for example, Moses' law concerning the leper, especially when we realize that Naaman himself was a leper (2 Kings 5:1b)! According to Mosaic legislation, the leper:

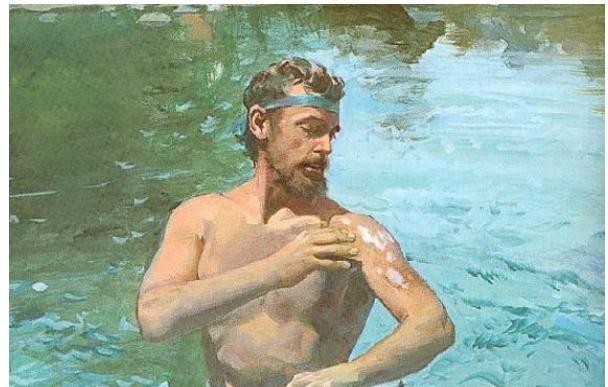
to be cleansed must wash his clothes, shave off all his hair and bathe with water; then he will be ceremonially clean. (Lv. 14:8)



Milvachs were fairly common among ancient Jews.



There is reference to the need for sprinkling a blood-water mixture upon the leper in the previous verse, but the Septuagint never translates sprinkling activity with the verb, baptizo (to baptize). It is the bathing found in Lv. 14:8 rather than the sprinkling in verse 7 which is more closely associated with what Naaman did. The Hebrew word, to bathe or wash, is *rahghatz*. This is the word used in Lv. 14:8 and again by Elisha when he instructed Naaman to wash in the Jordan (2 Kings 5:10; cf. also vs. 12, 13). We read that Naaman dipped seven times in the Jordan "as the man of God had told him...." In other words, the dipping of v. 14 corresponded to the command to wash in v.10. Now when we trace the word, *rahghatz*, through the Old Testament, we find, despite Dr. Adams' protestations to the contrary, many references to ceremonial washings which could easily be viewed as the "washings" referred to in Hebrews 9:10; viz:

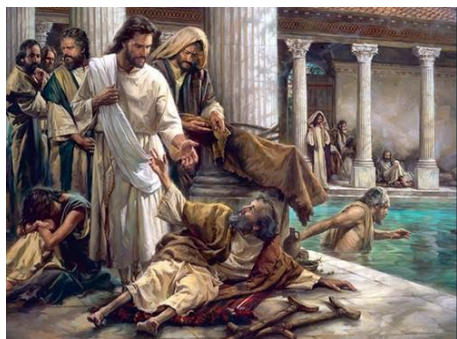


Leviticus 14:8,9; 15:5,6,7,8,10,11,13,16,18,21,22,27; 16:4,24,26, 28; 22:6.
Numbers 19:7, 8, 19.

How Dr. Adams can say that "...it is impossible to find the requirement for even one kind of immersion in the Old Testament law" and that "the law never required immersions" is puzzling. Many if not every one of these washings would be far closer to immersion than sprinkling. Lv. 15:16, for example, says, "... he must bathe his whole body with water...." See the other verses, too.

Dr. Adams believes "immersions must, of necessity, be all alike," but this is not true. Ritual details may differ according to the nature of the defilement or according to the body or object to be washed. For instance, parts of animals were to be washed (Ex.29:17; Lv.1:9,13; 8:21; 9:14), clothing was washed (Lv.11:25,28,32,29-40; Lv.15:13,17) and other articles (Lv.11:32).³

People with leprosy (cf. above), contaminated through touching (Lv.15:5,6,7,10,11,21,22,27) or spitting (Lv.15:8), with various discharges (Lv. 15:13,16,18; Dt.23:11), who had eaten something unclean (Lv.17:15,16), or who were involved in acts of worship (Lv.16:4,24,26,28) were to wash. Surely these could be thought of as various kinds of "washings" even if in every case the person or object was immersed.



As to the question of whether Jews would have tolerated dipping or immersion in John's day, see John 5:2-7 where it is stated explicitly that many were present in Jerusalem itself with the expressed purpose of getting into a pool for healing.

Finally, and perhaps of greatest significance, if Dr. Adams' contentions are true -- namely that New Testament baptism is the sequel to Old Testament baptism, then it greatly weakens any argument that New Testament baptism is the sequel to Old Testament circumcision. The main case for infant baptism

has been suspended on this supposition.

Does the Holy Spirit Point to Himself or to Christ?

Perhaps Dr. Adams' most attractive argument is found in his appeal to such verses as Mt. 3:11; Acts 1:4-5; 2:3,4,16,17,33; 10:44-48; and 11:15,16 to support the thesis that baptism symbolizes the descent of the Holy Spirit upon believers. In Acts 2:33, for example, we read that the Holy Spirit was "poured out" by Christ on the day of Pentecost. Now if John's baptism prefigured Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit (Mt.3:11), then presumably John's baptism was by pouring, also.

There is a good lesson here for those of us who profess to be Baptists by conviction. Our paedobaptist brothers and sisters are concerned to interpret Scripture faithfully, too, and this argument is no facile one. It forces us to reexamine the Scriptures to see if these things be so (cf. Acts 17:11).

Dr. Adams says, "If any Baptism in the Scriptures is important, it is the baptism that occurred at Pentecost" (p. 22). Since it involved a pouring (Acts 2:33), then water baptism should involve pouring, too, symbolizing the descent of the Holy Spirit coming upon the believer.

There are two things to say in response to this. First, few Christian churches practice pouring. Baptists might be accused of going too far; paedobaptists with their few drops, not far enough. If Dr. Adams' point is valid, then his argument needs to be applied as much by paedobaptists as Baptists.

However, there remains a serious question as to whether the Pentecost baptism was any more important to our understanding of baptism than the baptism Jesus referred to in Luke 12:50:

I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!

Jesus was speaking of the overwhelming ordeal of the cross at which time He experienced forsakenness from His Father with Whom up to that point He had known only eternal, unbroken fellowship and union.

He who is Life personified was about to experience death. Surely no mere man will ever know the agony of spirit Jesus experienced, and we may never know the infinite restraint the Father exercised in holding back His wrath against us for all the abuse we gave His Son on the cross. Can it honestly be said that the Pentecost baptism was greater or more important than this? Surely Jesus, who revealed such familiarity with the Psalms even while on the cross, knew something of the baptism he was about to experience from Psalm 69:



*Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink; deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters. Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the pit close its mouth over me.*⁴ (See vs.1-2, 14-15; cf. Ps. 42:7 and 124:4-5.)

The baptism Jesus experienced was like a drowning, but the plea for



deliverance on the part of David found its ultimate fulfillment in the resurrection of his great ... great grandson from the grave a thousand years later. It was impossible for death to retain Him because He was, is, and ever will be perfectly righteous. He becomes our righteousness through faith, and baptism properly symbolizes our union with Him in His death, burial and resurrection as Paul clearly indicates in Romans 6:1-11.⁵

Some years ago, an excellent devotional on this passage (Rom.6:1-11) from "The Family Altar", written primarily by ministers of the Christian Reformed Church (a denomination which practices sprinkling), appeared. Dr. Gordon Spykman, the author, said:

Baptism is a matter of life and death. No church may deal with this sacrament lightly, treating it merely as a christening ceremony. For baptism is the sign of our participation in Good Friday and Easter - the death and new life of our Lord. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" In answer, we point to our baptism, and say: "Yes, we were there." It was our sins that nailed Christ to the cross. The water of baptism represents our submersion in the blood bath of Calvary. It marks the drowning of the old man of sin within us. This is the shadow side of baptism. But there is also a sunny side. Baptism is the doorway to a new style of life. It is our initiation rite into the Christian community. Through baptism we not only share in Christ's death, but also in His victorious life. Having stood in the shadow of the cross, we are now called to walk in the light of the empty tomb.

The question before us, then, is "Should we view- water baptism as symbolizing the descent of the Holy Spirit upon us or as symbolizing our union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection?" Both symbols seem to have at least some scriptural validity. Rev. Leonard Greenway, also a minister in the Christian Reformed Church (paedobaptist), points us to a solution in another issue of the same "Family Altar" publication where he quotes Dr. Addison H. Leitch:



Dr. Addison H. Leitch, in his excellent book, *Interpreting Basic Theology*, makes the observation that one reason we have trouble appreciating the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is that "the chief office of the Holy Spirit is not so much to reveal truth concerning Himself as it is to reveal truth concerning Someone Else. Since He is the Spirit of Truth, then any truth we have concerning Him must come from Him; but in giving us truth in obedience to the requirements of His office he keeps pointing in that other direction." (p. 118) The Holy Spirit's office is to point to Christ. This is as Jesus said, "He shall testify of me."

Extending the point to the matter before us, that symbol which pictures the once-for-all accomplished work of Christ on our behalf rather than one which would depict the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost would be the symbol favored by the Holy Spirit Himself. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would glorify Him (John 16:14; cf. Jn.15:26b)!

Dr. Adams' argument, therefore, though attractive is not compelling. The Pentecost baptism was no more important than the one that occurred on Good Friday and Easter, and the symbol of baptism should point us to Christ. The Holy Spirit's task is not to spotlight Himself - but Christ. The Holy Spirit was indeed poured out on Pentecost, but baptism pictures our union with Christ in death, burial and resurrection (Rom.6:1-11).

No Preposition "Up"?

Dr. Adams contends that there is no preposition, "up", used to justify the "coming up out of the water" of Mark 1:10 (cf. Mt.3:16) and Acts 8:39. The Greek word in every case, however, is anabaino. The "ana" prefix means "upwards" or "up." It is surprising that Dr. Adams does not seem to have recognized this.

Three Thousand in One Day?

On page 45 of his little book, Dr. Adams argues that it would be unreasonable to believe that 3,000 people (Acts 2:41) could be immersed in one day, but this is not so.

First, the text does not seem to require that all the baptisms took place in one day, but even if they did, it would not present so very great a problem. Of the 120 disciples gathered in the upper room, surely 25 to 50 could have been involved in baptizing 3,000. If only 25, then 120 baptisms each would be required. This could be done in a few hours. If 50, then the task would be considerably easier. Each would have only 60. It is reported by Rev. William Scott, a faithful missionary to India, that John Clough baptized 2,222 people in one day in the last century. More recently, on Christmas Eve day, 6,215 people were immersed by 100 pastors in Burma (cf. *The American Baptist*, June 1978, front cover).

The scarcity of water in and around Jerusalem is thought to be another objection to baptizing so many, but this may be more imagined than real. If the excavations of the Bethesda pool (near the Temple area in Jerusalem) are reliable, then two pools existed -- one 55 feet long and the other 65 feet long.⁶

Apparently, a multitude of disabled were permitted in the area (John 5:3). Who knows but what many of the disabled were healed and even numbered among the 3,000 who were baptized? Undoubtedly the word about Jesus' healing the paralytic at that very spot was not hidden. Did not even Peter appeal to this truth when he said, "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know"? (See Acts 2:22.)

Is it unreasonable that many of these were prepared by Christ Himself to receive Peter's message? Would they not delight to give way to apostolic baptism on the spot? If the authorities could not contain the eleven, how much less would they even try to contain a happy group of 3,000. They were afraid of the crowds.

What a wonderful testimony to the power and authority of Christ. There, under the very noses of the religious leaders who had put Jesus to death, 3,000 affirm their faith that He who had been put to death and buried was alive from the dead and imparting life and liberty to all who believe.

Postscript

Dr. Jay E. Adams has proven to be a valuable leader in the Christian community, especially in the areas of preaching and biblical counseling. This paper should be construed in no sense as an attack on him. The author of this paper has high regard for him as a valiant warrior for the Truth and warm Christian affection for him as a brother in Christ.

This was originally written in January of 1983. Persons who would like to contact the author may write to paulhumber@verizon.net or 327 Green Lane Philadelphia, Pa. 19128.

Endnotes

1. The second is found in Isaiah 21:4 where it conveys the idea of being overwhelmed.
2. As per telephone conversation some years ago.
3. Mark 7:4 speaks of baptizing "cups, pitchers and kettles." Here is another link between the Greek word, baptizo (to baptize), and the Hebrew word, rahghatz (to bathe or wash). Dr. John Murray cites evidence that even couches and beds were constructed in such a way as to allow for dismantling and washing (cf. his *Christian Baptism*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970, p.19).
4. The Psalm is Messianic; cf. v.3 with Jn. 19:28, v.9 with Jn. 2:17, and v. 21 with Mt. 27:34 and Jn.19:28-30.
5. The idea of sins being washed away is also present, but it is all because of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection.
6. Merrill C. Tenney, Gen. Ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1 (1975), pp. 549-551.